

THE ISLAND OF THE STAIRS



Being a True Account of Certain Strange and Wonderful Adventures of Master John Hampden, Seaman, and Mistress Lucy Wilberforce, Gentlewoman, in the Great South Seas.

By CYRUS TOWNSEND BRADY

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CHAPTER IX.

In Which We Plan to Escape Together From the Ship.

I HAD no idea that it was morning already, the night had passed so quickly. The eastern sky was already gray, and although the day bade fair to be an unpleasant one there was already light enough to distinguish land off to starboard. We had run quite near it in the night. It was still too gray to make out much more than the existence of the land itself, but I thought I saw beyond the nearest island others rising. At any rate, there it was where it ought to be, and I didn't make any doubt but that it was the island which we had been seeking these weary months at sea.

The whole crew was on deck. I didn't see any signs of Captain Matthews' body, although I looked hastily about for it. I learned later that they had tumbled him overboard without a prayer or word after they had knocked him on the head. Pimball, Glibby and one or two others of the older seamen were on the quarterdeck, the rest being strung along the leeward in the waist staring at the island. Two hands were at the wheel. The ship was pitching and laboring heavily, and it required two hands to hold her up to it.

During the night they had taken a second reef in the topsails. A whole mile was now blowing. Everything above the topsails had been furled of course. The Rose of Devon was a wet ship in a sea-way, and she was making heavy weather out of it. I noticed one thing with satisfaction. They had evidently not thought it worth while to break open the arms chest or to force the key from me, which they could easily have done, and none of them was armed.

"Well," I began, as I climbed over the hatch combing and turned aft. "I sent for you, Hampden," began Pimball insistently, and his failure to "mistake" me or to give me any title indicated our present relations, "because of that," and he pointed to the leeward toward the island.

"It looks like land," I said. "It is land. What land?" "How can I tell?" I answered. "I have never been in these seas before."

"Well, you took an observation yesterday, didn't you?" "Certainly."

"And where were we?" I named a latitude and longitude not exactly what I had worked out, but near enough. I didn't want these ruffians to know exactly where we were. He pulled out the chart as I spoke and compared its figures with what I had given them. He could read figures if not letters.

"At any rate," he said, after studying over the map for a little time, "that is not far from the point we are making for, is it?"

"No," I admitted, "not very."

"Do you think that can be it?" "I can't tell for certain," I replied, "until I get another shot at the sun. I should think the latitude about right, but as to the longitude—"

"And you can't get no shot at the sun until noon, can you?" unconcernedly only in Glibby, casting a long look to the eastward where the sky was thick and cloudy already.

"I can't even get an observation then unless we have clear weather," I answered.

"There'll be no clear weather today. I take it," said an old seaman standing with the other two.

"I don't much think it," I assented. "Well, what do you advise then?" asked Pimball.

"That we stand on slowly during the day and bave to at night, and if we can't get a shot at the sun stay hereabouts until the sky is clear and the sun visible, then we will know just exactly what course to take and just what's best to be done."

The advice was so self evidently good, in fact the only practicable advice, that there was no hesitation in accepting it. The boatswain stepped up to the horseblock, grabbed the trumpet and shouted his orders. Presently the ship was hove to with the island well under her lee, distant perhaps a league and a half or maybe two leagues. Personally I should not have hove to a ship on a lee shore. I should not have advised it, and indeed would have protested against it had I not suddenly developed a plan—a plan as desperate as ever came into man's head. But then the situation required desperate remedies. And the accomplishment of the plan the ship was now in the very best position I could have put her.

I was minded to desert the ship with my lady, get ashore and trust ourselves to the tender mercies of whatever natives there were rather than stay with the vessel. I took no stock in the sailors' promises and agreements. Once they got the treasure it would follow that they would kill me and take her.

When we got the Rose of Devon safely hove to the men all knocked off work at once, leaving the decks in a state of confusion. Indeed, save to clear up the gear, there was nothing to do but wait. Two or three men were stationed on watch, and the rest were given the freedom of the ship. I was in doubt as to what to say about the cabin; but, strangely enough, nobody made any effort to take advantage of the mastery of the crew to quarter himself there. Indeed, their quarters forward were almost as good as ours, and they evidently preferred to be together. The ship was generously provisioned, and the fare of the men had been unusually good. They did, however, break into the lazarette and help themselves to whatever they liked out of the cabin stores, including a case of bottled spirits.

I brought out other liquor and let them have as much as they wanted. A little liquor would make them ugly and intractable, I reasoned; a lot would make them drunk, and enough would render them completely helpless. I even joined them in their carousal, and made a pretense of drinking, which soon deceived them. They took to the liquor like ducks to water.

The men on watch kept reasonably sober for a time, but even they were not too abstemious. I saw to that. Later on the cook, who was not yet too drunk, fixed them up a regular banquet out of the cabin stores, and there was no objection to my taking a portion to my lady in the stateroom below, where she kept close and remained out of the way by my urgent entreaty.

My communications that long day with my sweet charge were necessarily intermittent and short. I did not dare to be long away from the men on deck. I still wore my sword, and I searched through the captain's cabin and found two heavy pistols, which I carefully charged, concealing them in the deep pockets of my pea jacket. I passed among the men freely, handing out the spirits, opening fresh bottles and handing rough jests, but took care never to be in any position where I could not command the companion hatch, which led to the cabin.

Our drift was slowly but surely in the direction of the island. Indeed, I think we had made half a league or more to leeward since we had hove to. From time to time I searched the shore with a glass, seeing that the land was protected and completely inclosed by a reef, on that side at least, which agreed with the chart, but the sky continued overcast, and the mist grew thicker, so I couldn't make out much more than that. It was land, and that was enough. It was big enough to support life, and I thought that I detected green patches here and there that betokened vegetation and, if so, water and life.

Nobody took any care to strike the bells, but when darkness fell I declared noisily that I would go below and turn in. All but the most seasoned and hardy drinkers were by this time dead drunk. There was evidently some little remembrance of my rank, for no one yet conscious made any objection. Pimball, lying supine on the deck, and Glibby, who was in no better case, with drunken confusion assumed me that they would take care of the ship, and I went below, having provided all of them with a fresh supply of drink just before.

I sometimes wonder if I would not have been justified in killing them all while they were rendered thus helpless. But I could not bring myself to such wholesale murder, richly as they deserved it and little as I was inclined to mercy. I also thought of clapping them in irons and stowing them below. But there were not irons enough aboard for that purpose, and Mistress Lucy and I could not work the ship unaided. We could not even feed and water our prisoners. Yet if I could have counted on three or four true men's assistance I would have risked it.

How Mistress Lucy had passed the dreary, anxious hours of that awful day you can better imagine than I can describe. And my occasional visits had scarcely reassured her greatly. Yet in an emergency I have never

known a woman who had more spirit. She had left her noon meal practically untouched, and she was sitting there in the cabin nervously clutching the pistol, frightened half to death. Poor girl! I don't blame her. Whatever may have been the cause of it, she was genuinely glad to see me when I came in and lighted the cabin lantern.

"Oh," she cried, "I have been in agony the whole day. Every sound has caused me to seize this weapon, and when I have not been watching the door I have been on my knees praying for you and for myself. I do not think I can stand another day like this."

"Please God, dear lady, you shall not," I said, smiling reassuringly at her.

"What do you mean? Have you a plan?"

"I have. The men are all drunk. I am going to leave the ship and take you with me."

"But how—when?"

For answer I threw open the stern window of her cabin. On a level with it swung a small boat, a whaleboat. Now I had taken occasion during the day to lower that boat little by little, a few inches at a time and then a few inches at another time, as I had opportunity to get near the falls and to manipulate them unobserved, but I had brought it down to the level of the cabin windows. Its sea lashings were cast off, and I had no doubt, if conditions on deck were as I expected them, I could lower it all the way later with impunity.

"What do you mean?" she asked, staring out of the window and into the empty boat.

"I mean that you and I are going to embark in that boat tonight and leave this ship."

"But where are we going?"

"There is land not a league and a half under our lee. It seems to be the most easterly of a cluster of islands."

"Is it the island we seek, do you think?"

"We are in exactly the latitude and the longitude of the chart if my calculations are correct."

"The island was uninhabited when my ancestor was cast away upon it."

"Yes," said I, "but there may be natives there now, but no savages of the south seas could be more cruel and ruthless than the men on this ship."

"Let us go," she said, shuddering.

"What is your plan?"

"I want you to dress yourself in your stoutest clothes, with your heaviest shoes, wrap yourself up in a boat cloak and take with you a change of clothes and some few necessities for your comfort. I will go and rummage the lazarette for provisions, and I will see if I can turn up any more weapons in the captain's room. I dare not go to the arms chest—it was below in the hold anyway, and I could not waste the time to hunt it out—we must hurry."

"Why, you said they were insensible."

"They'll recover their senses before we know it. I want as long a start as possible."

"Wait a moment," she said. She opened a drawer under her berth and drew out a leather case, which she opened and placed before me. There were two ivory handled silver mounted pistols in it. "They belonged to my father," she said. "With one of them he—"

Her voice broke. I nodded. I knew what he had done with one of them. She rummaged further and drew out an exquisite sword, quite unlike my heavy one, but if I could judge anything about weapons, of fine temper and strength and with its hilt studded with diamonds. "This was my father's too," she said. And I recognized it also. It was that I had taken from Arcester.

The pistols were smaller than my huge barkers, better suited for her hand, and to load them from the flasks which accompanied them was the work of a few minutes. I thrust my own heavy weapon back into my belt. I then buckled her two pistols around her waist and bade her take the sword also. We might need all these weapons.

Then I left her and went out on deck. The men were in a profound drunken stupor. Pimball was sound asleep; Glibby was nodding. He leered at me as I drew abreast of him. "Everythin' a-right a-right!" he hiccupped.

"Everything," I answered. "The old bark doesn't need much watching to-night."

I yawned extravagantly. "I will go and turn in, I think. If you need me call me."

As I went below into the cabin I saw that in a few moments he would be like the rest.

CHAPTER X.

In Which We Pass the Barrier.

THE lazarette was well provided, and I stocked the boat hand, some, not forgetting an ax, a lantern and plunder box. There was not much water, but I emptied some bottles of wine and filled them, although I did not much worry on that account because there would be plenty of water undoubtedly on the island. The boat was provided with a compass and a mast and sail. I got into her as she swung at the davits and overhauled spar and gear. Then I shipped the tiller, and presently everything was ready. A final search brought to light a narrow locker in the captain's room, which I forced open and which I found to contain a fine fowling piece, a double barreled shotgun and a heavy musket with plenty of powder and ball. These I passed into the boat also.

"Have you got now what you wish to take?" I asked when all my preparations were completed.

"A change of linen, some toilet articles and necessities, brush and comb, needles and thread," she answered, holding up her bundle.

"Good," said I. I judged it was about 10 o'clock at night. "Now, do you get into the boat, madam."

She had not been on the ship for six months without having learned something, and she instantly asked me,

"Do You Eat Everything?"

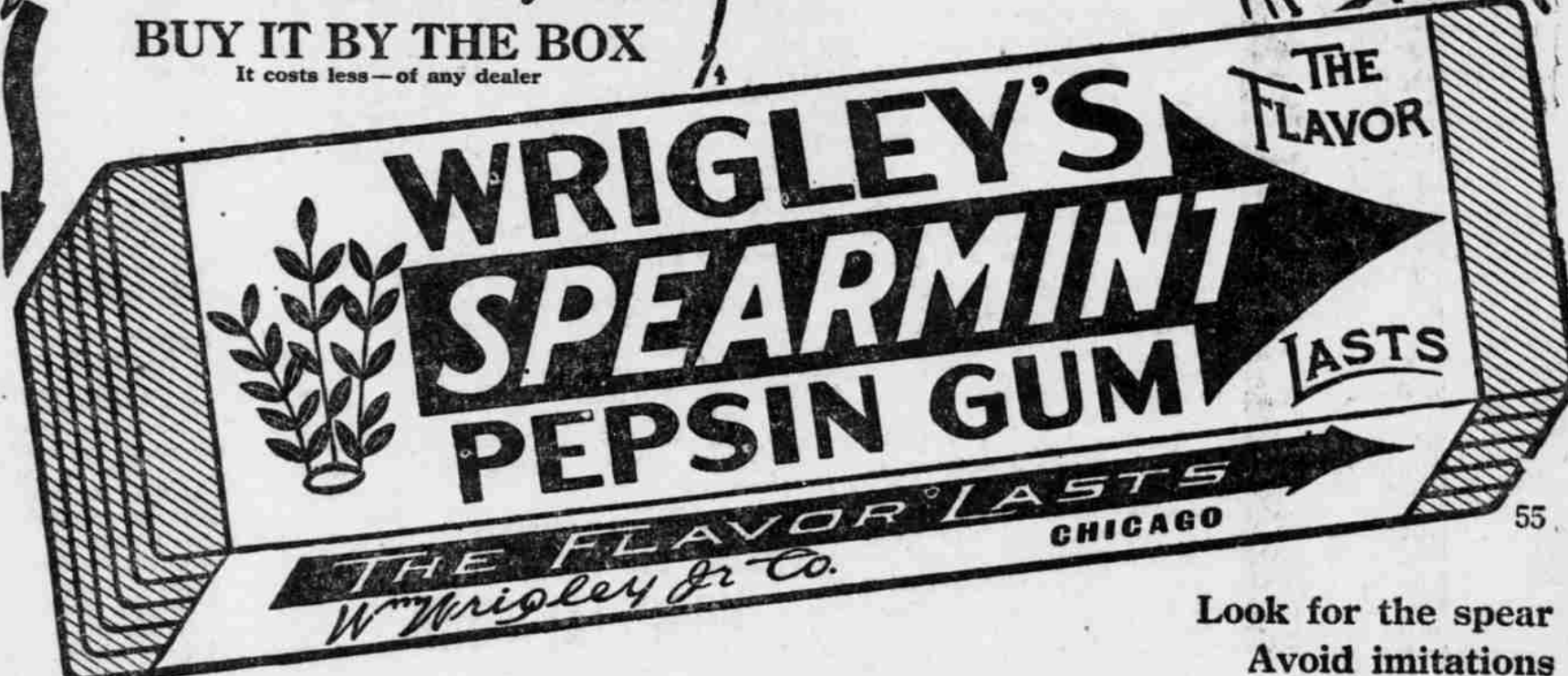
"Yes, almost! I enjoy it because I digest it with Wrigley's **SPEARMINT**"

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"But how are you going to lower it away?"

"I will have to go up on deck for that," I said.

"But won't they see you?"

"I don't think so, but whether they do or not we must chance it, but if anything should happen to me I'll cut the boat adrift, and you will be in God's hands."

Silently I assisted her to take her place in the stern sheets. It was not a large boat. On the contrary, yet she made but a small figure sitting there. Then I went on deck. I had a can of oil with me to oil the blocks. It was as I fancied. By that time everybody on the ship was asleep in a drunken stupor. The ship was deserted so far as human supervision was concerned.

Still I didn't neglect any precaution. I oiled the shives of the block and lowered the boat away carefully, inch by inch, until it was water borne.

I supposed I must have thrashed about somewhat when I brought the dingy to the wind and changed her course, for presently my little mistress awoke. She sat up instantly, and after the briefest acknowledgment of my good morning and the briefest reply to my inquiry as to how she did she stared at the land toward which we were edging in so far as the wind would allow. It was a bleak, inhospitable looking place, that gray, rough wall, in spite of its frequent crustings of verdure. I will admit, and she, too, found it so. After she had stared hard at the land she cast an anxious glance to leeward, but, of course, could make nothing of the distant islands there.

"We must get ashore," said I, "as soon as possible. By the time their debauch will have worn off they will either bring the ship here or send the boat after us. Afloat we can do nothing, ashore we may find some concealment and probably make some defense."

"It is a bleak looking spot."

Indeed, not a curl of smoke anywhere betrayed the presence of mankind. Had it not been for depressions in the walls of the cliff here and there, one might have supposed the island to be nothing but a desolate and arid rock, but this reassured me. I thought it strange that there was no mountain or hill rising from beyond the top of the wall, but I was yet to see how strange the island was.

But as it was full morning now I decided that first of all the creature comforts had to be thought of. I offered to relinquish the tiller and prepare something to eat, but Mistress Lucy took that upon herself. What we had was cold, but there was plenty of it, and at my urging she ate heartily. For myself I needed no stimulus but my raging hunger. I wanted her to be in fettle for whatever might happen.

We had not much conversation the while, but I do remember that she did say she had rather be here alone with me than on the ship, whereat my heart pounded, but I had sense enough to say nothing. Her loneliness and helplessness appealed to me. I might have been bold under other circumstances, but not now.

Well, we coasted along that barrier reef a good part of the morning until we reached the other end of the island and discovered to our dismay that there was absolutely no opening, no break in it through which we could

islands that I had ever known or read about. But I could not see the opening from the boat yet. The lagoon enclosed by the barrier reef seemed to be a quarter or half a mile wide.

The strangest part of the whole scene was that the island itself looked like a whitish gray wall rising straight up from the lagoon for, I suppose, from 150 feet in the lowest part to 300 feet or more without a break. Its top was covered with greenery. It stood up like a solid rampart of stone. From where we were I couldn't see the end of the island, although from my inspection of it the day before I judged it might be six or eight miles long, and as I had snifled past it I estimated it was about the same breadth and nearly circular in shape.

A long distance away on the other side and hard to be seen at all from the level of the sea in the small boat lay other islands, faintly outlined on the far horizon.

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make our way. When we reached the lower end my lady was for sailing around on the other side, but this I did not dare. We had heard nothing from the ship or her boats, and I didn't propose to arouse any pursuit by coming within possible range of her glasses. I did not know where the Rose of Devon lay.

"Madam," said I at last, "there is naught for us but to try to go over the reef in some fashion. As I examined the island yesterday through the glasses I couldn't see any opening in the reef on that side, and, although I never saw or heard of a case like this before, I make no doubt but what the reef is continuous and there is no access to the island except over it. And come to think of it, Sir Philip's chart showed no opening either."

"I recall that the reef completely encircles the island in the map," assented my lady.

"Then we must even pass over it as we can. I have had some experience in taking a boat through the surf, and, although it is a prodigious risk, I believe I can take this one over. I think we shall win through if you will sit perfectly quiet and trust to me."

"I will do whatever you tell me," she said with a most becoming and unusual meekness. "I think—I know—I trust you entirely, Master Hampden."

"Very well," said I quietly, "and may God help us!"

Fortunately the tide was making toward the shore of the island. I selected a spot where the huge, rolling waves seemed to break more smoothly than elsewhere, which argued a greater depth of water over the barrier, less roughness and fewer possibilities of being wrecked on the jagged points of the coral reef. Dousing the sail, unshipping the tiller and rudder and pulling the oars with all my strength after an unuttered prayer I shot the boat directly toward the spot I had chosen. Just before I reached it I threw the oars aboard, seized one of them, which I wished to use as a steering oar, and stepped aft past my lady, who sat a little forward and well down in the bottom of the boat. I braced myself in the stern sheets and waited. We were racing toward that reef with dizzy speed, rising with the uplift of the wave. I had just time for one word.

"If we die," I shouted, "remember that I have been your true servant always."

She nodded her head, her eyes glistening, and then I lost sight of her. A huge roller overtook us. The little boat rose and rose and rose with a giddy, furious motion. Suddenly it began to turn. If it went broadside to the reef and a wave caught it or one broke over it we should be lost, but I had foreseen the danger. I threw out my oar and with every pound of strength in arm, leg and body I thrust blindly, desperately, against the thrust of the sea. It was an unequal combat, a man against the Pacific ocean. I couldn't have maintained it for long. And yet it seemed hours. The strain was terrific.

The wave we were riding broke just as we reached the top. We sank down into what seemed a valley of water, the breakers roared in our ears, the spray fell over us like rain. We sank lower and lower, there was a sound of grinding along the keel. We had struck the coral evidently. I thought this was all for another moment and the bottom would have been ripped out of her; but no, we were over in safety.

The last reminder of the wave broke fairly over us and struck me in

the back as I stood aft with such force as to bring me to my knees. However, in that position I acted as a sort of breakwater and the dinghy was not completely filled. Although she had shipped quantities of sea, she still floated. The force with which we had been thrown over the crest of the wave drove us landward with tremendous



The Strain Was Terrific.

speed. It was terrific. I was stunned for a moment, but the sweetest voice in the world recalled me to my senses. "It was glorious, magnificent!" cried my mistress exultantly. "Are you hurt? Are we safe?"

Her clothes had been drenched, of course, but she was otherwise unharmed and there was a strange light in her eyes.

"I am not hurt," I answered. "God has preserved me thus far."

"For me," she said softly. "For your service," I answered gravely, quite understanding that was what she meant.

And now to make the landing. The boat, while it had come to a standstill, was filled with water, but I couldn't stop to bail it out then, so I stepped carefully forward, shipped the oars and rowed slowly forward across the lagoon.

(To be Continued Next Saturday.)

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